

Before Trump, Steve King Set the Agenda for the Wall and Anti-Immigrant Politics

By Trip Gabriel

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Update: [Steve King was removed from his committee assignments](#) over the comments made in this article.

Years before President Trump forced a government shutdown over a border wall, triggering a momentous test of wills in Washington, Representative Steve King of Iowa took to the House floor to show off a model of a 12-foot border wall he had designed.

And long before Mr. Trump demonized immigrants — accusing Mexico of exporting criminals and calling for an end to birthright citizenship — Mr. King turned those views into talking points, with his use of [misleading data](#) about victims of undocumented immigrants and [demeaning remarks about Latinos](#).

Immigration is Mr. Trump's go-to issue, his surest connection to his most faithful supporters, and his prime-time address on Tuesday night underscored [his willingness to use fear and misleading statements](#) to appeal to voters — just as he did with warnings about a migrant caravan before the midterm elections.

The Republican Party hadn't always intended to go this route: Officials tried for years to come up with broad-based immigration reform that would appeal to growing numbers of Latino voters. But Mr. Trump's preoccupation with the wall and anti-immigrant politics reflects how he has embraced the once-fringe views of Mr. King, [who has used racist language](#) in the past, [promotes neo-Nazis on Twitter](#) and was recently denounced by one Republican leader as a white supremacist.

With the federal government in a third week of paralysis over a border wall, Mr. Trump's positions are a reminder of how Mr. King's ideology and his language maligning undocumented residents helped shape the Republican message in 2016 and 2018 and define Mr. Trump's agenda and prospects for re-election. Mr. King may have been ostracized by some Republicans over his racist remarks and extremist ties, but as much of the nation debates immigration, his views now carry substantial influence on the right.

Early in Mr. Trump's term, the president invited Mr. King — who was long snubbed by establishment Republicans like the former House speaker John A. Boehner — to the Oval Office. There, the president boasted of having raised more

money for the congressman's campaigns than anyone else, including during a 2014 Iowa visit, Mr. King recalled in an interview with The Times.

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“Yes, Mr. President,” Mr. King replied. “But I market-tested your immigration policy for 14 years, and that ought to be worth something.”

Mr. King, a 69-year-old former bulldozer operator with a combative manner, who has been elected nine times, helped write the book on white identity politics that are ascendant in Mr. Trump's Republican Party. That provides both a template for Mr. Trump and a warning.

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Mr. King, left, in March 2006. He has denounced immigration reform efforts under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama as “amnesty.” Credit Doug Mills/The New York Times

Image



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Mr. King’s full-throated embrace of nativism has long found a supportive constituency in the rural Midwest, the region that was a key to Mr. Trump’s 2016 victory and represents his most likely path to re-election.

But at the same time, Mr. King’s margin of victory in 2018 shrank to its narrowest in 16 years. He made national headlines for endorsing a [Toronto mayoral candidate with neo-Nazi ties](#) and for [meeting with a far-right Austrian party](#) accused of trivializing the Holocaust. On [Twitter](#), he follows [an Australian anti-Semitic activist](#), who proposed hanging a portrait of Hitler “in every classroom.” And in October, the chairman of the Republican House elections committee, Representative Steve Stivers of Ohio, [condemned Mr. King, saying, “We must stand up against white supremacy and hate in all forms.”](#)

[Mr. King lost corporate agriculture donors](#) like Purina, Land O’Lakes and Smithfield. He dropped from an 18-point lead over his Democratic opponent in his internal polls to barely squeaking out a three-point win on Election Day. On

Wednesday, Mr. King drew a formidable challenger for his Fourth District seat in the 2020 Republican primary: Randy Feenstra, an assistant majority leader in the State Senate, who said Mr. King had left Iowa “without a seat at the table” because of “sideshows” and “distractions.”

Mr. King, in the interview, said he was not a racist. He pointed to his Twitter timeline showing him greeting Iowans of all races and religions in his Washington office. (The same office once displayed a [Confederate flag on his desk](#).)

At the same time, he said, he supports immigrants who enter the country legally and fully assimilate because what matters more than race is “the culture of America” based on values brought to the United States by whites from Europe.

“White nationalist, white supremacist, Western civilization — how did that language become offensive?” Mr. King said. “Why did I sit in classes teaching me about the merits of our history and our civilization?”

After this article was published Thursday, Mr. King issued a public statement calling himself a “nationalist” and defending his support of “western civilization’s values,” and said he was not an advocate for “white nationalism and white supremacy.” “I want to make one thing abundantly clear: I reject those labels and the evil ideology they define,” he wrote.

Mr. King’s influence over national politics derives from his representation of the reddest district in the first presidential nominating state. Nearly all the 2016 Republican presidential contenders sought his blessing at a forum he hosted in Des Moines in January 2015, Mr. Trump included.

Mr. King graduated from Denison High School in 1967 with an all-white senior class. The school now has a Hispanic majority. Credit Mary Mathis for The New York Times



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“Donald Trump came to Iowa as a real nonideological candidate,” Mr. King recalled. Mr. Trump’s first hire in Iowa, Chuck Laudner, was a former chief of staff to Mr. King. Mr. Trump’s first Iowa rally directly followed a visit to the Mexican border.

The previous year, Mr. Trump had visited to endorse Mr. King’s re-election. [As the congressman warned](#) of scenarios like Islamic State terrorists or even Africans with ebola illegally entering the country, Mr. Trump listened and nodded. When he stepped to the microphone, he echoed Mr. King.

“Well, border security is a very big issue,” he said. “People are just flooding across.”

Tom Tancredo, a former Colorado congressman who once held the most conservative views in official Washington on immigration, calling for a moratorium on even legal immigrants, said he “handed the baton to Steve King” when he left the House in 2008.

David Johnson, a former Republican state senator from Mr. King’s district, said he heard in the president’s rhetoric a direct echo of Mr. King. “They belong to the

same subset of white nationalists who are afraid of how the country is changing,” he said.

Mr. King was born in Storm Lake, Iowa, and attended high school in nearby Denison, then a nearly all-white rural farming region, where his father managed a state police radio station.

After founding an earth-moving company, Mr. King ran successfully for the State Senate in 1996. His most notable legacy from six years in the Legislature was a law making English the official state language. It was a time when packinghouses and other agricultural employers had dropped wages, and Latino migrants increasingly were taking jobs that no longer attracted native-born Iowans.

Elected to Congress in 2002, Mr. King attracted the attention of hate-watch groups like the Anti-Defamation League as he spoke increasingly about preserving “Western culture” or “Western civilization.” The groups consider those buzzwords that signal support to white nationalists, along with an obsession with birthrates and abortion rates among different ethnic groups.

“He uses the concepts of either ‘culture’ or ‘civilization’ to obfuscate that he’s talking about whiteness and race,” said Lawrence Rosenthal, chairman of the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies.

Mr. King has been elected to nine terms, but his margin of victory shrank to his narrowest ever in November. Credit Scott Morgan/Reuters

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In 2011, Mr. King objected to the Affordable Care Act’s mandate to cover contraception. “That’s not constructive to our culture and our civilization,” he said in [a speech in the House](#). “If we let our birthrate get down below the replacement rate, we’re a dying civilization.”

Mr. King seems further emboldened during the Trump presidency.

[In an interview in August with a far-right web publication in Austria](#), Mr. King displayed a deep familiarity with racist tracts and ideas embraced by white supremacists.

He spoke of “the Great Replacement,” a conspiracy theory on the far right that claims shadowy elites are working behind the scenes to reduce white populations to minorities in their own countries.

“Great replacement, yes,” Mr. King said in the interview. “These people walking into Europe by ethnic migration, 80 percent are young men.”

The accusation that a “great replacement” of whites is underway — which conspiracy theorists often link to prominent Jews like George Soros — animated the [torch-carrying white nationalists in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017](#), who chanted, “You will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us.”

Mr. Trump’s refusal to condemn the marchers, and his insistence that there were “very fine people on both sides,” was cheered by neo-Nazi websites.

In Mr. King’s interview with the Austrian website, he repeated his yearslong critique of multiculturalism.

“What does this diversity bring that we don’t already have? Mexican food. Chinese food,” he said. “Those things, well, that’s fine, but what does it bring that we don’t have that is worth the price?”

While serving in the Iowa Legislature in the 1990s, Mr. King helped pass a law making English the state’s official language.
Credit Mary Mathis for The New York Times
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In recent years, Mr. King has forged alliances with far-right European leaders, including [Marine Le Pen of France](#) and Geert Wilders of the Netherlands, one of the most anti-Muslim politicians in Europe, who calls for [closing mosques](#).

Ahead of Dutch elections in March 2017, Mr. King [endorsed Mr. Wilders in a tweet](#), saying, “We can’t restore our civilization with somebody else’s babies.”

Amid an ensuing controversy, he claimed the tweet wasn’t about race. Virulent white supremacists, however, heard otherwise.

“Steve King is basically an open white nationalist at this point,” wrote Andrew Anglin, the founder of the neo-Nazi Daily Stormer.

[Mr. Anglin and others celebrated](#) that Mr. Trump’s election had made once-fringe beliefs about ethnonationalism acceptable to mainstream politicians.

As Republicans have morphed from the party of George W. Bush, who sought legal status for 12 million undocumented immigrants, to the party of Mr. Trump and Mr. King, some party leaders fear for the future in a nation where Hispanic voters are a rapidly growing electorate.

“Great damage has been done,” said Carlos Curbelo, a moderate Republican who lost a South Florida congressional seat in the midterms. “For anyone who cares about having a small-government, free-enterprise party in America that can aspire to win national elections, it’s a real concern.”

Mr. Curbelo, who tried to forge compromise on immigration in the House last year, said Mr. Trump told him privately, including on Air Force One, that he wanted a deal with Democrats.

But the president is paralyzed by the far right, Mr. Curbelo said. “He’s terrified of losing his base and the so-called conservative media.”

Last week, as the new Congress was sworn in, Mr. King sat on his side of a chamber sharply delineated by demographics. The Democratic majority included record numbers of African-Americans and women, including the first Native American and the first Muslim women. Mr. King’s side was mostly people who look like him.

“You could look over there and think the Democratic Party is no country for white men,” he said.